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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000642

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/22/2017

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKISH GOVERNMENT MAKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR AKDAMAR CHURCH OPENING

REF: STATE 34039

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4(b),(d)

1.(C) Summary: MFA DDG Bicakli confirmed in a March 19 meeting with us that on March 29 the GOT will officially re-open as a museum the restored Armenian Church on Akdamar Island in Lake Van. We stressed that the opening presents Turkey an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to reconciliation with Armenia. Bicakli told us that the GOT is seeking to capitalize on the opportunity by including Armenians in the ceremony. The Ministry of Culture (MOC), as event organizer, together with the Van Governorate, has invited a diverse array of guests, including culture ministers from neighboring countries, including Armenia; Armenian religious figures; members of the Armenian Diaspora; and representatives of Turkey's religious minority communities. Citing logistical and safety concerns, the Interior Ministry blocked a temporary opening of the land border or an event-specific direct Yerevan-Van flight to bring Armenians to the event. Armenian guests will instead fly into Istanbul and then be transported to Van by a private flight. Embassy will continue to urge contacts in the GOT to use this event to showcase Turkey's commitment to reconciliation. End summary.

2.(C) MFA DDG Huseyin Avni Bicakli confirmed with us March 19 that the GOT will officially open the restored Armenian Church on Akdamar Island in Lake Van on March 29. The former church will be a museum managed by the Ministry of Culture. We stressed that the opening presents an opportunity for the GOT to demonstrate it is committed to reconciling with Armenia. Securing the participation of Armenian patriarch Mesrob II would be key to showing Armenians in Armenia and abroad that Turkey is committed to reconciliation. We urged that the GOT seriously consider Mesrob's request to put a cross on the top of the church, which would allow him to lead one religious service there each year on the anniversary of the church's name day..

3.(C) The GOT, Bicakli said, had taken steps to capitalize on the opportunity. The GOT had wanted to hold the event in April but chose March because Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II counseled that as April was a month of mourning for Armenians, if it were held then, Armenians would not travel. The Culture Ministry, which has the lead on organization, together with the Van Governorate has invited a diverse array of guests, including:

--Culture Ministers from Armenia, Russia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan;

--The four Armenian Patriarchs, from Istanbul, Moscow, Yerevan, and Jerusalem.

--Twenty-two Armenian Metropolitans and Archbishops from Armenia, Syria, France, Russia, Austria, Lebanon, the United States, and Canada;

--Over 65 representatives from the Armenian Diaspora;

--Representatives from Turkey's Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and Assyriac communities;

--A number of Ambassadors to Turkey; and

--Representatives from the Turkish and foreign media.

4.(C) GOT Minister of Culture Koc and Minister of Education Celik (a Van MP) will attend, and other GOT officials "could decide to go." The GOT thus far has received a confirmation that Georgia will send its Deputy Culture Minister. Bicakli, though clearly not a decision-maker, seemed receptive to the notion of putting a cross on the church to allow for an annual religious service and said he would inquire with appropriate GOT officials.

5.(C) The GOT plans to use the Yerevan-Istanbul air corridor to bring guests from Armenia. Bicakli dismissed press reports that claimed GOT decided for political reasons against allowing a direct land crossing or a direct

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Yerevan-Van flight Istanbul MFA Deputy U/S Rafet Akgunay had recently chaired an inter-ministerial meeting to discuss transportation for the Akdamar opening. Akgunay floated the idea of opening the Turkish-Armenian land border for several days for the event. The Interior Ministry and Customs officials reportedly rejected the proposal, citing the lack of sufficient infrastructure at the border. Using such run-down facilities during a high-profile event would be "bad for Turkey's image."

6.(C) A direct flight from Yerevan to Van would also not be possible due to the unusual landing conditions at the Van airport, which require pilots to touch down immediately after passing over the lake, and then stop on a short runway, according to Bicakli. The GOT would take all guests to Van on two private chartered flights out of Istanbul and Ankara. Guests will be bused from the airport to Lake Van, where they will take one of three ferries for the half-hour ride to Akdamar Island.

7.(C) We followed up on these issues March 21 with PM Adviser Nabi Avci, repeating Patriarch Mesrob's concerns and the direct flight/border opening issues, and urging the GOT to do all it can to make this event a success in reaching out to the Armenian community. While pessimistic on the border and flight issues, Avci clearly understood the message and committed to pass on our concerns directly to PM Erdogan ASAP.

8.(C) Comment: The Turks have reached out with their invitations, but the very form of the invitations (from the Van Governorate) may take some aback. There is also no sign at present that either PM Erdogan or FM Gul intends to attend. It is a good sign, however, that MFA is talking directly to Mesrob II. As with all issues Armenia, it seems that we must engage the Prime Ministry to get any forward movement. End comment.

WILSON